

CHAPTER FIVE

GALEN'S THEORY OF AMBIGUITY

The main original contribution of Galen's *De Captionibus* to the philosophy of language in antiquity is a theoretical description of linguistic ambiguity. Galen's achievement may be described as an exhaustive classification (including definitions by genus and differentia) of every sort of ambiguity that occurs in language.¹ Galen's theory is designed both to yield a deeper insight into linguistic ambiguity and to reveal the true nature of this phenomenon.

Briefly, in his theory Galen appeals to five principles which govern all cases of ambiguity in language: *Actuality*, *Potentiality*, *Appearance*, *Being Lexical*, and *Being Syntactic*. Galen proceeds by accepting as 'givens' both Aristotle's enumeration of the types of ambiguity² and the following preliminary definition of sentential ambiguity:

an ambiguous sentence =df. a sentence, the utterance or inscription of which has at least two distinct meanings.³

From there he classifies and defines the types of ambiguity he himself countenances as follows:

Homonymy =df. actual, lexical ambiguity
Amphiboly =df. actual, syntactic ambiguity
Accent =df. potential, lexical ambiguity
Combination and Division =df. potential, syntactic ambiguity
Form of expression_(L) =df. apparent, lexical ambiguity
Form of expression_(S) =df. apparent, syntactic ambiguity

Galen claims that his method⁴ shows that any case of ambiguity

¹ It is intended to apply to ancient Greek, but may be modified to apply to other natural languages, like English. See *infra* p. 45, n. 19.

² We recall that Galen misreads Aristotle on this topic since three of the latter's modes (Accent, Combination, Division) are cases of linguistic confusion, not of ambiguity. See *supra* pp. 24-28.

³ As reformulated here, Galen lifts this from *Soph. El.* 4. 165^b29-30. See 90,20-21.

⁴ See *infra* pp. 50-52, and 104,3-5.

in language will fall under one of these jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive headings.⁵

Now that Galen's theory has been expounded in skeletal form, I turn to describing more completely the substance of the theoretical principles he invokes. Only a detailed analysis of the scope, content, and implications of Galen's theory will do justice to his insight into this linguistic and logical problem. His theory is constructed to characterize and explain ambiguity as it occurs in *sentences*.⁶ This focus on sentential ambiguity reflects Galen's intent in *De Captionibus* to discuss the role of ambiguity in producing fallacious arguments—and such ambiguity will be sentential (i.e., it will concern either the premise or the conclusion of such an argument).

According to Galen's theory, for any ambiguous sentence, its ambiguity will be either lexical or syntactic, and actual, potential, or apparent. The notion of lexical ambiguity is relatively unproblematic. A sentence is *lexically ambiguous* when one of its words has more than one sense, even when that word is isolated from the sentence in question. For example, 'The object is light' is a case of lexical ambiguity because the adjective 'light' has two senses ('of little weight,' 'pale in color'), and it accounts for the sentence being ambiguous.

The notion of syntactic ambiguity is a bit more complicated, and here one struggles to resist the temptation to discern contemporary linguistic insight in the meager account Galen provides for it. A sentence is said to be *syntactically ambiguous* not when one of its words has more than one sense, but rather when its ambiguity derives from the sentence as such, (αὐτὸς ὁ λόγος, 88,10); that is, from the *combination* of its words. Presumably Galen means by 'αὐτὸς ὁ λόγος,' the structure of the sentence which is syntactically ambiguous, and his brief analyses of syntactic ambiguity at 88,11-13 and 90,1-2 support this interpretation.

According to traditional grammar, a sentence that is syntactically ambiguous is one that admits of more than one parsing. This disposition of the sentence reveals the ambiguity of its structure that in turn causes the sentence to be ambiguous. Galen seems

⁵ That Galen's modes are intended to be mutually exclusive is indirectly shown by his criticism of the Stoic enumeration of the kinds of ambiguity. Galen attacks their teaching on the grounds that the kinds of ambiguity they list are not mutually exclusive (108,9-10). See *infra* p. 82, n. 31.

⁶ See 98,3-5.